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Murray Lee Eiland

PARTHIANS AND ROMANS AT NINEVEH

Introduction

The emergence of Parthia as a political force by the reign of Mithradates II (123–88/7 B.C.) was of great concern to Rome, since the province of Syria was directly threatened by the Parthian presence in Mesopotamia. Throughout the Parthian period there were periodic raids into Roman territory from the east. In order to maintain control of the region, Rome entered into diplomatic alliances with, or at times directly controlled, Armenia and northern Mesopotamia. From such a base of operations Syria could be protected, and Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital in southern Mesopotamia, could be threatened. Roman diplomatic policy favoured the creation of small buffer states not directly aligned with Parthia. Such may have been the case for the state of Adiabene, which in the first century A.D. encompassed the region around Nineveh (Eiland 1992).

Consequently, material evidence¹ that points to a “Roman” military presence at Nineveh is of particular interest, and two particular classes of material evidence will be considered in this paper. The most obvious is any **pottery** that has been taken to be distinctive of workshops within the Roman Empire. However, this evidence is equivocal in its relevance to the presence of Roman troops in any specific place. As a result, isolated **metal fittings and metal objects** may be more instructive, and an attempt is made here to define “Roman” and “Parthian” equipment. First, however, the ceramic evidence will be considered, particularly in the light of the small amount of Roman ceramic material that was found on the site.²

¹ There is also extensive numismatic evidence to support the presence of Roman forces. As this is of a more specialized nature, it will be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

² The material evidence considered here is the result of British excavations, directed by R. Campbell-Thompson, at Nineveh from 1928–1932. A more complete treatment of the “Roman” ceramic evidence – particularly several well known western lamp types and petrographic/chemical analysis of *terra sigillata* – is presented in Eiland 1995. It should be noted, however, that out of a corpus of pottery selected by the excavators there were no more than several dozen pieces of easily identified “Roman” ceramics.

The Political Implications of the Presence of Roman Red Ware

Although it is impossible to determine if the fragments of Roman Red found at Nineveh result from trade or occupation, it is relevant to ask whether a Roman military occupation of Nineveh might be expected to have involved a change in ceramics.

While this issue has not been discussed for Near Eastern sites such as Dura-Europos, where there was a range of ceramics used and traded throughout the period of Roman occupation, this question has been extensively studied for the Roman occupation of Britain. Greene (1979: 99) notes that in the first phases of Roman occupation, the army would have had little need of pottery; as use would have been made of metal cooking vessels. Representations of Roman mess tins attached to the shafts of legionary *pila* are clearly depicted on Trajan's column (Strong 1976: pl. 80). There is also a striking lack of pottery finds from temporary marching camps. Other evidence, from both Spain and Germany, suggests that after a period of consolidation, Roman tastes for certain kinds of pottery needed to be met. Although local potters would be encouraged to manufacture Samian copies, there is clear evidence that many still preferred imported vessels as a mark of distinction. Coarse vessels for day to day use may have remained unchanged. Although Roman military establishments did bring potters with them, in Britain there were continuations of pre-Roman pottery types well after the conquest.

A quartermaster may then have been concerned with providing cheap and usable pottery for the army (Greene 1979: 103). On many sites there is no simple correlation between Roman activity and Roman ceramics. The army was, no doubt, a major consumer of ceramics, but the civilian trade would in many instances have determined the market, if only because culturally determined dietary habits would to some extent have determined what vessels were used (Dannell 1979: 177-79).

In assessing Roman activity in the area about Nineveh, two salient factors must be considered:

A. As has been noted above, evidence from Britain and other regions is against any simple correlation between Roman ceramic types and local Roman activity. It is also clear that short term occupation need not stimulate an imitative ceramic industry.

B. Unlike Britain during the period of Roman occupation, the Near East was a society that was fully capable of providing a number of different types of vessels for specific needs (van As/Jacobs 1992). Water jars were adapted to desert climates, and, as the need to carry water was extreme, large pilgrim flasks were also used. Vessel types of this utilitarian variety could hardly have changed with a Roman occupation, no matter how long. If the evidence of pottery is always likely to be equivocal, what of metalwork?

First, however, it may be prudent to discuss Roman military involvement in the area, as the majority of easily identifiable Roman remains are clearly related to military activity. An important consideration to address is whether finds of Roman military equipment fit into a plausible historical context. When attempting a task such as this, however, one must keep in mind the nature of the sources. Much of the difficulty in defining this period relates to the lack of Parthian written records. Instead, one must rely upon Greek and Roman authors, who often had little understanding of eastern geography and wrote from a hostile perspective. As a result, establishing the extent of Parthian influence, and an exact chronology, is difficult (Wolski 1966: 37-40).

Nineveh as Part of the Roman Frontier

Although there has been little historical research directed towards elucidating the Roman period at Nineveh, Hutchinson (1934: 86) notes that a number of manuscripts of Tacitus' *Annals* contain a description of Nineveh as a "castellum." He notes that the term is used to denote a "little camp," while in practice it conveys a sense of permanency. It is often applied to a fort built to house a *cohors milliaria* or a *cohors quingenaria*. He finds that the term was probably used to describe the Parthian village atop the Neo-Assyrian terrace or perhaps a hypothetical village on the mound of Nebi Yunus (Hutchinson 1934: 88).³ *Castellum* in this case would presumably have been used to denote a small settlement, and not a Roman fortification. Hutchinson never addressed the status of the village as Parthian or Roman. At the time there was little evidence to suggest that Rome could have penetrated so far east, but subsequent excavations in the region support Roman activity in the region.

Aspects of Roman imperialism in the east have received attention for a long period of time, but there has been renewed interest in the subject as archaeological surveys have been compared with classical sources. Scholarly opinion can be divided into two general lines of thought. Earlier investigations found a planned Roman establishment of control through a variety of political and economic programs, with warfare no more than a cynical bid for power. Recently, scholars have challenged older assumptions, and analysed Roman motives not as part of an overall economic policy, but rather as a "series of accidents." Economic benefits from warfare and political intrigue were not planned but fortuitous (North 1981: 1). As evidence, authors cite many instances where Roman gains by warfare during the second century B.C. were not incorporated into any administrative structure, and were only taxed erratically.

A prime reason for conquest, and one that is often alluded to in classical sources, is the desire to emulate the conquests of Alexander. This motivation would be manifest particularly on a personal scale, and could be detected in the personal statements or actions of individual commanders. The campaigns of Trajan are perhaps the most famous, but there are other Roman commanders who dreamed of fame from the eastern campaigns. Other motives beyond simple fame are also clear, as a large amount of Roman capital flowed into Parthian hands because of the luxury trade from the so-called silk route. This left the Parthians and their dependant and semi-dependant vassals with enviable wealth.

It should be appreciated that a Roman presence, for whatever reason, in the east may not manifest itself in material remains. The *limes* in Germany, or Hadrian's wall⁴, were the result of policing a region with few settlements capable of supporting a sizable number of troops.

³ The site of Nineveh lies on the left bank of the Tigris, about a mile from the present bed of the river. Within the walls lie two mounds. The larger of the two, Kouyunjik, is a half a mile wide by a quarter broad, and about one hundred feet in height. The smaller mound, Nebi Yunus, the site of a modern village (with a mosque dedicated to the Biblical Jonah), lies about a mile south of Kouyunjik. For a recent treatment of the geography of the city see Stronach 1995.

⁴ Sites along Hadrian's Wall in England, particularly South Shields, contain tantalizing evidence for east-west trade. Besides the well-known tombstone of Regina, which records the British wife of a Syrian Merchant (Johnson 1994: 94), there are clear examples of Syrian glass housed in the museum on the site. The existence of large scale glass manufacture during the Parthian period is yet to be thoroughly investigated, but is the subject of ongoing investigation by the author.

The situation was different for the Near East, with a long tradition of large cities, that were located on major trade routes. While controlling a region in Germany using watch-towers and fortifications may have been possible, such is not the case for large areas of the Near East, where rough terrain and desert would discourage a definite line of defence. Most of the decisive wars between Rome and Iran in Mesopotamia have hinged upon the control of a major city (Hodgeson 1989: 181).

There are a number of factors that make delineating the frontier between Rome and Parthia difficult. One of the most significant is the identification of remains. Northern Mesopotamia today can be appreciated as covering two distinct geographical regions, both prone to specific ecological factors. Remains in north-east Syria are often obscured by layers of wind blown silt. The region of the Tigris valley to the north-west of Mosul is obscured by great amounts of vegetation due to the high rainfall in that region, and Stein's aerial reconnaissance indicated the problem of identifying remains in the region (Kennedy/Riley 1990: 64–5). The difficulty of conducting fieldwork in the region today has been compounded by modern methods of cultivation, which have claimed vast tracts of land.⁵

The next most important question to posit is: how far did the Romans penetrate into northern Mesopotamia? This question may not be as simple as it would first appear, as there is still debate over how to define a Roman settlement. There does, however, appear to be a general consensus over the site of Seh Qubba in Iraq. This site, located on a high bluff above the Tigris, about 100 km. north-west of Nineveh, was considered the eastern-most excavated site within the Roman Empire (Ball 1989: 12). Roman remains occur in two levels, separated by an indeterminate period of time. The site was surrounded by a thick wall, and contained quantities of "Roman" pottery and piping. There is also a building with a fragmentary mosaic executed in Roman style. This site may have been founded as the result of an action by Trajan (Lepper 1948), Cassius, or Aurelius, and then perhaps occupied for a longer period of time by Severus (Ball 1989: 11).⁶ In between these two occupations, it is unclear if the site was inhabited on any scale, although there is some evidence of Parthian pottery on the site (Campbell 1989: 53). If this was indeed a Roman fortification, then the Parthians may have had little interest in manning it after a Roman withdrawal, as their military strategy was very different from that of the Romans.

The Province of Mesopotamia

From circumstantial evidence, the province of Mesopotamia appears to have been created after the second Parthian war. The province is recorded as being under the command of Valerius Valerianus, as was revealed by an inscription on a column found at Caesarea Maritima in 1961 (Speidel 1992: 219). This inscription records that he controlled Mesopotamian imperial finance to the sum of 10,000 sesterces a year, and that he was in charge of the completion of the campaign against the Arabs. It is recorded that the first prefect of the province of Meso-

⁵ The writer was made aware of the problems presented by intensive farming on a recent trip to eastern Syria. There are large tracts of land that have been leveled and ploughed for agriculture when it is clear that there is not enough water in the vicinity to support such efforts.

⁶ An exhaustive treatment of this period is given by Platnauer 1919.

potamia was Subatianus Aquila, and as he had been in office in A.D. 195, one would have expected him and not Valerianus to have commanded the troops in Mesopotamia.

Evidence of the way Mesopotamia was administered comes from an inscription on a sarcophagus from Carian Aphrodisias (the village of Old Geyre), in Anatolia. The date can be limited to the period between A.D. 198–217 on the basis of a title. The inscription outlines the career of a veteran of the Legio I Parthica, and mention the garrisoning of a site by the Tigris. This led Syme (1992: 201) to speculate that:

“... a distinction may have been made between two different parts of Mesopotamia, one in the vicinity of Chaboras and Euphrates rivers, guarded by Legio III Parthica, and one in that of the river Tigris, guarded by Legio I Parthica.”

It seems from the inscription that the *limes* (if this term can be used in this context) at this time was based upon the Tigris.

Summary

While it is clear that there is evidence of Roman activity at Nineveh – including small finds, ceramics, and coins – and there is historical evidence to suggest that there was Roman activity in the area during the campaigns of Trajan and Severus, there are no structures to give any solid evidence to support **long term** occupation of the site. While it is possible that Parthian Nineveh offered suitable structures, further excavation is needed to clarify this period. The mound of Nebi Yunus, which may remain unexcavated because of the Moslem shrine on it, appears particularly attractive for further exploration. It is also possible that Roman activity took place as part of a “client state” relationship with Adiabene. As this evidence does indeed demonstrate a Roman presence at Nineveh, this site, barring further archaeological investigation in the region, may be considered the easternmost penetration of Roman forces.

The Material Evidence

Terracotta “Parthian” Foot Soldier (Fig. 1)

This figurine is unlike any other example recovered from Nineveh, and is distinct from other typical Parthian figurines. Significantly, the figurine was not associated with a horse. The figure carries a large shield and wears a light cloth garment with a hood. There is no trace of armour or weapons, and no trace of metallic personal ornament.

The interaction between Roman and Parthian military technology – if not military personnel – is well illustrated by this figurine. The majority of male Parthian figurines are executed in the horse and rider style. It is easily appreciated that they are similar to those of legionaries from Rome, as such shields were standard equipment during the Republican period (Bishop/Coulston 1989: 19); other examples of similar shields can also be found on mounted warriors from “Hellenistic” levels from a number of Near Eastern sites (Sekunda 1994: pls. 21, 46). While the accoutrements of the figurine may not necessarily demonstrate the presence of Roman/Parthian auxiliaries at Nineveh, it illustrates the close interaction between

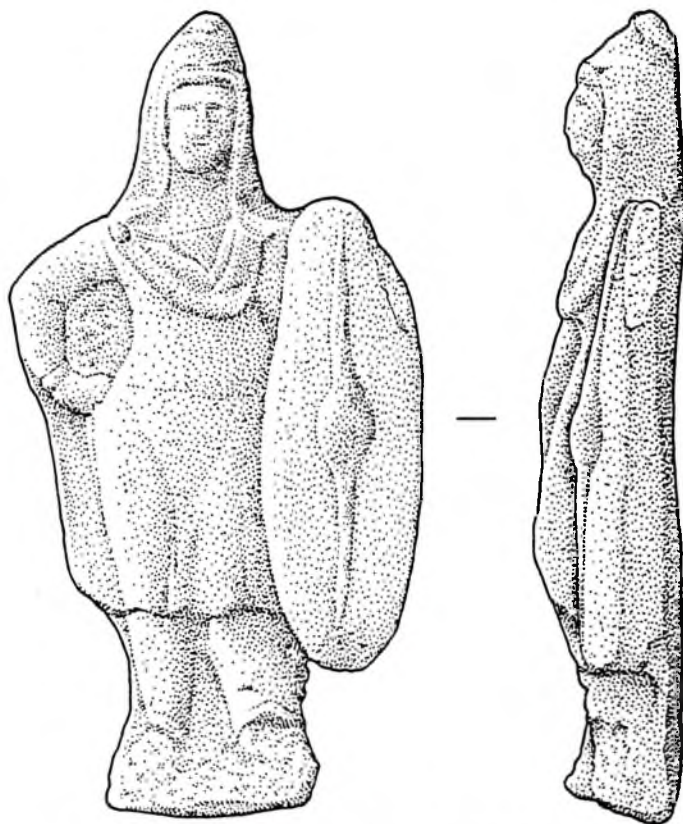


Fig. 1. Parthian Terracotta Figurine from Nineveh (Scale 1:1; B.M. 1929, 10–12, 356)

Romans and Parthians in military matters.⁷ It is also clear that such interaction did not merely affect Parthian military technology.⁸

While it is clear that the figure is in Parthian dress, there is no reason to assume that the soldier in question was necessarily under Parthian command. It has long been appreciated that the Roman empire recruited numbers of *auxilia*, and two *alae Parthorum* are well documented. The widely held view that this unit was composed largely, or even exclusively, by Parthian deserters has been recently challenged by the discovery of a new inscription. Peterson (1966: 61), presents a gravestone that lists the names of four soldiers, bearing Semitic and

⁷ For a discussion on the origins of cavalry and mounted weapons see Boss 1994. It is also clear that the Achaemenids were capable of fielding foot soldiers, although they are not commonly depicted (Sekunda 1992: 48–50). In addition, the topic of Parthian mounted cavalry has received detailed attention from Polish scholars. See Mielczarek 1993.

⁸ A summary of how Parthian military technology and strategy effected the Roman military is given by Kurtz (1983: 561–3); particular military technology – swords and armor – is discussed by Hoffmeyer (1961: 58, 59).

Persian names – and a new unit – the *ala Parthorum et Araborum* (illustrated in Instinsky 1958: 73). The name of this unit suggests its origins, as the two different tribes can be assumed to have both a common life-style and live in close neighbourhood. The date of the inscription offers further clues about the history of the region. The date of A.D. 70 can be accepted as the *terminus ante quem* of the inscription, and going back to a period thirty years before the death of the horseman one would be led into the reign of Tiberius or Caligula. The origin of the *ala Parthorum et Araborum* may be connected with Caligula's grant of Armenia Minor to Kotys in A.D. 38. According to Cassius Dio, Kotys received "some tracts of Arabia," presumably Osroene or part of it. One may assume that the newly installed king – as was standard practice of a client king – recruited or perhaps allowed to be recruited, the *ala* from among his subjects (Peterson 1966: 68).

The metal finds⁹ described as follows were in a degraded condition, and it is clear that the drawings in the reports of Campbell-Thompson would not correspond with the artifacts as they are today. There were large numbers of metal finds that were not recorded. While it is clear that the objects did come from the Nineveh excavations, their archaeological context is unclear, as find spots were generally not recorded on the artifacts (barring the Roman military badge, below).

Bronze Military "Badge" (Fig. 2)

Small circular bronze disk of openwork design. Fragmentary eagle in centre and inscription about circumference. Although this is noted as coming from level "D 6" on the figure it has a label that states it is from "D 5." This piece of metal is perhaps the most significant find from the "Roman" period at Nineveh; especially when it is placed into the context of other finds from the Roman sphere recovered during the excavations of Campbell-Thompson. Similar badges are common from many Roman sites, such as Mainz (Feugere 1993: 228). Bishop and Coulston (1989: 130) note that the motif had a general applicability. The most elaborate openwork *phalera* type had a central eagle clutching thunder-bolts, surrounded by an annular inscription. The eagle was an allusion to Jupiter, and was a popular motif applied to a variety of armour elements. Examples are cited from German frontier forts, Strasbourg, Lorch, and forts and towns in Britain. An illustrated example, similar to the one from Nineveh, was recently found at Carlisle (Bishop/Coulston 1993: pl. 91:2).

Bronze Applied Decoration (Fig. 3)

This small device, decorated with what appears to be a geometric floral pattern, appears to have been attached to leather or fabric. In form it is similar to small personal ornaments of the "Palmyrene" style (Nicolle 1991: pl. E). It could correspond to Roman belt fittings. Although a range of forms were used in various places and at various times, military belts were often decorated with studs (up to 16 studs on a single belt). A number of Roman sites from various areas yield large numbers of decorative studs. As a result it is impossible to ascertain function. Such ornamentation was not uncommon in the first century A.D. (Bishop/Coulston 1993: 98–99).

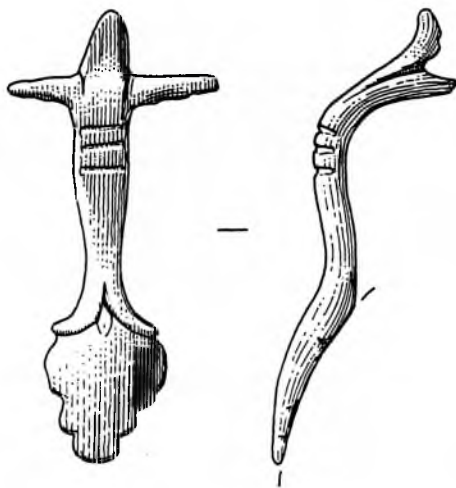
⁹ Thanks are due to Dr. Simon James, from the British Museum Education Service, who offered his opinions on this material and canvassed the opinions of other specialists from the museum.



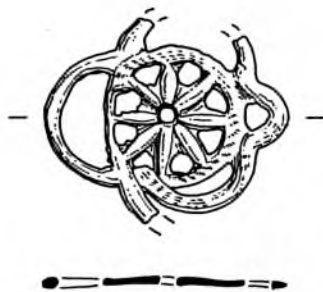
Fig. 2. Roman Military Badge, B.M. 1930-5-8 (after Campbell-Thompson and Hutchinson, 1931, pl. XXII)

Bronze Vessel Handle (Fig. 3)

This fitting is executed in a distinctly Roman style. In form it is much like a "crossbow type" brooch, although there are clear attachment areas where it was welded to a vessel. Handles of a similar type are common "metal detector" finds from the Roman period in Britain. A bronze vessel was roughly cast and then turned on a lathe. The handle, which was usually of a decorative form, was soldered on separately. As a result, they are often found separate from the vessels. Similar examples from the first and second centuries A.D. can be found from Verulamium and London (de la Bedoyere 1989: 79).



Vessel Handle (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 1156'52)



Applied Decoration (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 704'79)

Fig. 3

Bronze Buckle (Fig. 4 A)

The length of the tongue suggests that it had two symmetrical loops, the one on the left is broken off at the return of the vertical bar, and is not any wider than the drawing implies. The concave circular decoration about the inner bars of the buckle give this piece somewhat less decoration than is normally encountered in published buckles from the first century A.D. In form the buckle is not out of keeping with Roman waist-belt buckles of the first century A.D. Military belts were important stores of wealth, as precious metal examples were often recorded as being exchanged for goods. Other examples were plated, and the decoration of this example from Nineveh may indicate that it was originally plated, as the surface shows a characteristic surface (although no plating remains). They were functionally concerned with both supporting the sidearm and also relieve the weight of a mail shirt (Bishop/Coulston 1993: 96).

Bronze Belt Fitting (Fig. 4 B)

Copper/bronze, of a very simple form, the link is not in keeping with western Roman finds. It is ascribed by Dr. James to a workshop in Palmyra.¹⁰ A similar example is depicted as a link on the waistbelt of a Palmyrene man in Parthian dress, a statue now located just inside the gate of the Palmyra museum.¹¹ The bronze belt fitting was attached on each side by a link around the middle of each shorter side, which is consistent with the thinning on the left and the break on the right of the object.

Bronze Fibula (Fig. 4 C)

The fibula is of copper/bronze of a fine form with some indication of an inscription (detail on drawing) that is no longer legible. Fibulae were used to secure clothing. A pin was held in tension against the body of the brooch. This example is of the classic "Aucissa" type brooch. In form the example from Nineveh is a simple bow with a hinged pin. Similar examples first appear in Britain in c. A.D. 50. Some were made by a manufacturer called Aucissa, whose name appears on select examples. They are particularly well known from military sites (de la Bedoyere 1989: 121). They became common in Britain during the first and second centuries A.D., but were replaced by other distinctive types after that date. Decorated bronze examples are often plated, although there is no indication of plating on this example. This object offers the best indication of date and provenance of any metal find. "British" fibulae have also been recovered from Dura (personal observation at the Yale University Art Gallery).

Iron "Curry" Comb (Fig. 5 A)

Made of iron, with a bank of tines on either side of a ridge, this comb is similar to modern curry combs used to brush the horse's mane. There are a variety of unpublished combs and ridged beaters (presumably for textiles) recovered from Dura. The wooden material from Dura varies considerably in style. None of the textile beaters (in keeping with modern prac-

¹⁰ As the Palmyrenes were long in the service of Rome as auxiliary or mercenary troops they will be considered "Roman" here.

¹¹ The example is, to the author's knowledge, unpublished. Military "Palmyrene" dress is presented by Nicolle (1991: 18–9, 38).

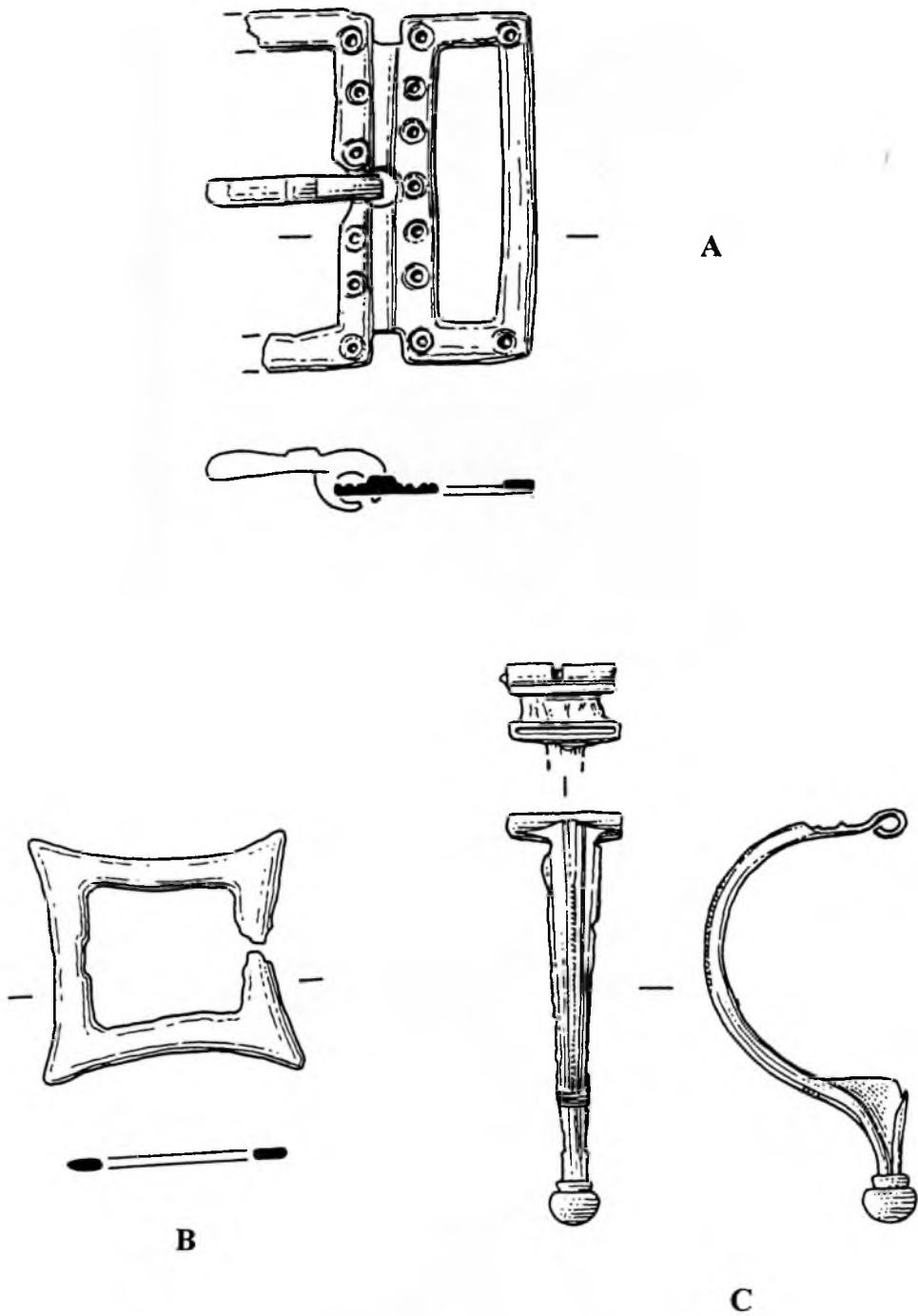


Fig. 4. A: Buckle (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 784'79); B: Link (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 785'79); C: Fibula (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 797'79)

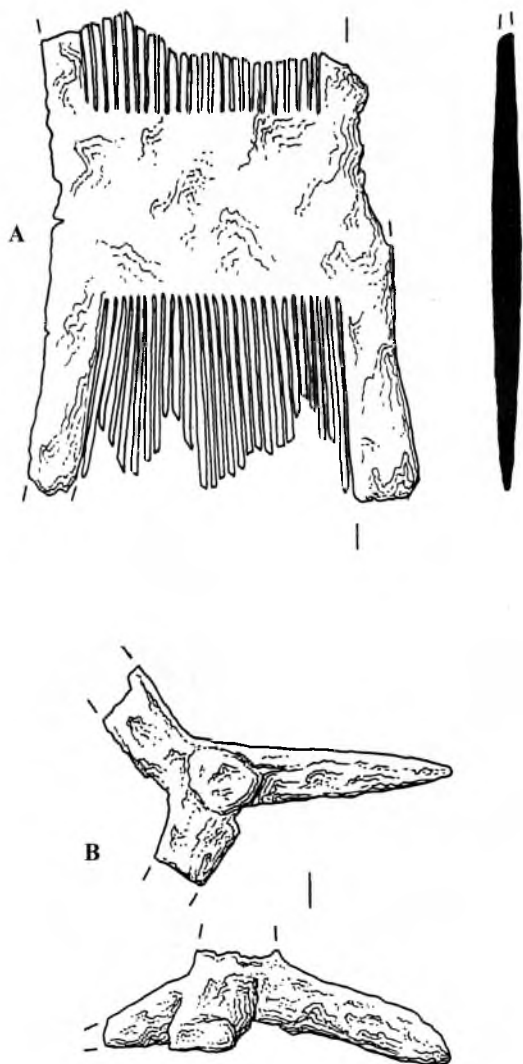


Fig. 5. A: Curry Comb (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 464'79); B: Caltrop (Scale 1:1; Birmingham 439'79)

tice) are double sided. Combs for human use have considerably shorter teeth than the example from Nineveh (Roman combs: Galloway/Newcomer 1981: 73, 87). It is also significant to note that all examples of the latter appear to have been made of wood. Clearly one would expect objects of iron to be poorly represented archaeologically, but from the available evidence one could propose that the iron comb from Nineveh is a curry comb, perhaps for military use. Dating the object is almost impossible by context, but one could hazard the third century A.D.

Caltrop (Fig. 5 B)

Iron spike of a "triangular form," constructed so that whichever way it is placed, a sharp spike is available to discourage the use of cavalry. A number of iron caltrops in various states of preservation, have been recovered from Nineveh (all in the City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham). These were not recorded in the reports or drawn, which is surprising considering the importance of these artifacts.

Caltrops (*triboli*) can be placed into historical context. They were used during imperial times, although they may have been a Hellenistic development. They were commonly put around Roman military installations where a supply may have been kept at hand (Bishop/Coulston 1993: 155, fig. 111: 8–11). Many examples were found at Dura.

It is significant to note that caltrops are only attributed archaeologically to the Romans.¹² As the campaigns of Severus (A.D. 193–211) were noted for their extensive use of cavalry, they could be of this period, but without reliable stratigraphy, the exact date remains insecure.

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¹² Because so few Parthian sites have been properly excavated, this observation should remain tentative.

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